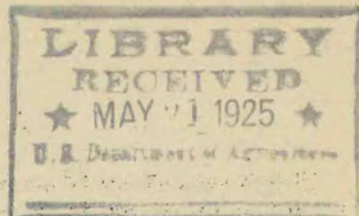


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THE NATURAL BRIDGE NATIONAL FOREST

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A Chapter

of

Virginia History  
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H. M. Sears, Forest Supervisor

April, 1925.



### A Historic Milestone

The Natural Bridge National Forest, in its origin, development and growth, adds another item of great historic value to the traditions of Virginia. A forest of 154,000 acres owned by the United States, situated in the picturesque Virginia Blue Ridge Mountains, including some of the best timber-producing land in the country, and within a few hours ride of the largest population centers in the United States, should be an object of greatest interest and pride to every citizen.

### Early Settlement

No other State in this country has a richer, more beautiful background of tradition than Virginia. As the failing sunlight in evening brings out in enhanced beauty the glory of Virginia mountains, valleys and rivers, so now the events of the early settlements at the mouth of the James assume a greater interest in the dim light of their remoteness. The mere mention of such names as Pocohontas, Smith, Rolfe, call to mind a period in the State's and Nation's history, when the fate of civilization on this continent was decided only by the unlimited courage and sacrifice of the little band of Englishmen that clung tenaciously to these shores, in spite of well nigh unsurmountable difficulties.

When it had become apparent that the little colony was to survive, its growth was rapid, and since its location was directly at the mouth of the James River, it is natural that the first routes of exploration would be along this river, rather than through the trackless forests with which the country was covered.

From the tiny spot begun in 1607, the settlement spread in widening circles or semi-circles from the common center. Can we imagine the situation? History tells us that forests of oak, walnut, ash and pine grew in such density as had never been seen in the homelands. It is recounted that large herds of deer, moose, elk, bear, mountain lion, squirrels, rabbits and "86 varieties of birds" inhabited the forests. Here was the stronghold of the Algonquin family represented by the Powhatan, Pamunky and other tribes, extending south to the present southern boundary of the State, where they were joined by the warlike Iroquois tribe of South Carolina.

Can we imagine those first intrepid searchers for a pass to the "other sea," searching farther and farther up the banks of the James until the surrounding lands rose from the levels of the sea to the broad rolling Piedmont Plateau?



### The Blue Ridge Gets a Name

Can we imagine the first explorer at last reaching a point of vantage whence looking far into the west, there met his view a long, scarcely broken chain of mountains which then as now were enveloped in their haze, so characteristically blue? Through a considerable period of time this background of mountains formed the western boundary of the White Man's knowledge of the New World, and to express the absolute limit of known distance, they had but to say - "as far back as that 'Blue Ridge,'" which has come down through the years as the name of this chain of mountains.

Probably the first white men to pass through or beyond the Blue Ridge were the Jesuits in 1632. Edward Bland made an exploration of the region in 1650. In 1712, Governor Spotswood, fired by the glowing tales of the great wealth and beauty of the "Great Valley," headed an exploration which reached the top of the Blue Ridge at Swift Run Gap, now on the Rockingham-Greene county line.

### The Mountains Pass into Private Hands

The English planters of the eastern shores were too busily engaged in the cultivation of their tobacco to seek further worlds to conquer, and while they were thus engaged, another salient of the line of civilization developed from the Scotch Irish and Huguenot settlements in the north and extended up the Shenandoah Valley, preceding by several decades any general transfiltration of the eastern colonists across the Blue Ridge. Today we find marked difference in many of the local customs, the Blue Ridge still marking the division line between these two sources of local stock. By 1750 the lowlands of Virginia had been largely settled and new comers were forced farther and farther back toward the mountains. From 1750 to 1780, we find a period of rapid settlement in the foothills and broader valleys in the Blue Ridge, and by 1800, practically every acre of the land which is now within the Natural Bridge National Forest had passed from Colony or State ownership into the hands of private owners.

### The Forest Begins to Disappear

This development of the country continued both because and in spite of the heavy stands of timber. Timber was necessary for the construction of houses, fences and stables, but was an ever present obstacle to the spread of agricultural pursuits.

Although by the year 1775 there were many towns and cities in the lowlands and valleys well past their infancy and youth, this date can be taken as the beginning of development and settlement of the mountainous regions of the State.

Concurrently with the growth of agriculture, the depletion of the original forests proceeded. Many stories are told of the days when the



magnificent trees of the forest were felled, rolled into heaps and burned to make way for the ever-expanding tobacco and cornfields. Long before the first crude waterpower sawmills appeared along the streams, the richer valleys and streambeds had been cleared, some of the logs hewed for the "Mansion Houses," stables and servants quarters, some "rived" into boards for floors and roofing. Even to this day in some sections of the mountains, the sawmill is considered as an ultra modern invention and the inhabitants can split boards from an oak log with accuracy and speed.

On the east side of the Blue Ridge during the first half of the 19th century, the plantation homes reached a development little short of regal splendor. Higher in the mountains, the poor soils were rapidly exhausted and further clearing was continually necessary for the crops. On the west of the Blue Ridge, with the exception of an occasional broad valley, the soils were too poor for any kind of farming, and no development was made.

#### The Civil War Checks Agricultural Expansion

Following the civil war, the luxurious plantations of the eastern foothills, fell into disuse. The labor with which these farms had been made to pay handsome profits, had been lost, and hundreds of acres, once dotted by millions of tobacco hills and lined with rows of waving corn, are again covered with forests, while the location of the palatial residences are now marked by tall stone chimneys standing amid the growth of pines and smaller brush, silent reminders of the glory that once was "old Virginia."

But on the higher valleys and hillsides where conditions precluded the owning of slaves, away from the paths of invading and defending armies, the war made but little impression. And today the changing ways and conditions of the valleys do not disturb these mountain folks. As their fathers and forefathers tended their tobacco in the early days at Jamestown, so do these remnants of our first settlers continue.

The last decades of the 19th century ushered in a period of industrial development. Discovery of iron and manganiferous ore in the west side of the Blue Ridge brought a period of rapid development in the valley. The James River and Kanawha canal, which had for years carried the freight along the James River, became the Richmond and Alleghany Railway, now the Chesapeake and Ohio.

The Shenandoah Valley Railway was put through to Roanoke in the early nineties and is now the Shenandoah Valley branch of the Norfolk and Western. Towns grew up over night along these railroads. Exhausted timberlands of Pennsylvania sent lumbermen and tanners into Virginia for new supplies of timber and tannin.

The first large sawmill was located at Arcadia, although there were earlier tanneries located at Basic, Buena Vista and Lynnhburg. The stand of timber, still standing after the century and a half of constant inroads into the forest, was being rapidly reduced to an area of waste land.



Still worse, as the timber was rapidly removed, leaving large areas of brush and mountain land exposed to the drying heat of the sun, as the population increased by an influx of people not acquainted with the mountains, forest fires became a yearly occurrence. This condition continued for some twenty to thirty years. The wild game, once so plentiful, was represented by a few badly frightened rabbits and squirrels seeking a refuge in their fast dwindling forest home.

Tanneries, paper mills, and dye plants poured out their poison wastes into the streams. Misguided, so-called sportsmen, fished and dynamited, hunted and trapped the few remaining fish and game animals.

A few scattered bodies of timber, large areas of short, fire-stunted brush, black, fire-tortured snags, weathered-white ghosts of the forest, stood on the bleak, desolate, ridge tops and slopes, as a pitiful, battle-scarred fragment of the noble virgin forest.

#### The Beginning of the National Forest

Such were the conditions in the Blue Ridge Mountains in Botetourt, Bedford, Amherst, Rockbridge, Augusta and Nelson counties, when, in 1911, the Congress of the United States, passed a law authorizing and providing funds for the purchase of mountain lands for the protection of the watersheds of navigable streams. This action followed a study extending over ten to fifteen years covering the conditions of forest cover in its relation to streamflow throughout the Southern Appalachian regions.

In the fall of 1911, the first party of timber appraisal engineers, arrived at Natural Bridge, Virginia, to begin the appraisal of a tract of land offered for sale to the United States by Major Wm. A. Anderson of Lexington. This was the beginning. There followed purchases in Botetourte and Bedford counties. In the following years purchases were extended into Amherst, Augusta and Nelson counties, and the end is not yet. The process of placing more and more of this type of land under National Forest administration still continues.

Today the Natural Bridge National Forest controls the crest of the Blue Ridge from a point near Buchanan on the James River to a point just south of Basic on the Shenandoah River, protecting the heads of the Staunton, James and Potomac rivers. It is approximately 70 miles long and from five to fifteen miles wide, containing a gross acreage of 279,000 acres and an area of Government-owned land of 153,000 acres.

This area has now returned from its one hundred and fifty year period of private ownership to the ownership of the United States. It is as distinctly a public property as are the various and sundry other Government establishments. Instead of being the property of a few, managed or



mismanaged, for private gain or loss, it is the property of every citizen of the United States and is managed for the benefit of the entire nation. Its benefits to the nation are many and can be grouped as follows:

#### (1) Watershed Protection

Principal tributaries of three major drainage systems of the East have their source within the National Forest. Perhaps the most important of these is the Potomac River. The South Fork of the Shenandoah River, one of the largest tributaries of the Potomac, has its source in the north end of the Forest in Augusta County. Approximately 25,000 acres of the National Forest lie in this watershed. There can be no question as to the importance of the protection of the Potomac River in consideration of its bearing upon navigation to and from the National Capital and as the source of a water supply for that section.

The largest drainage area within the Forest is that of the James, including some 125,000 acres of land now owned by the United States. South River rises in Augusta County and with its tributaries drains the entire west side of the Blue Ridge south to Duena Vista where it joins North River, which joins the James at Balcony Falls. Elk Creek, Jennings Creek, Middle Creek and North Creek are all large tributaries of the James above its confluence with North River, while Rocky Row Run, Hunting Creek, Otter Creek, Pedlar, Buffalo, Tye, Piney and Rockfish rivers are all large tributaries below this point, having their source within the National Forest.

The extreme southeast end of the Forest covers the head of large tributaries of Staunton River which assumes great importance to industrial and agricultural development in North Carolina.

#### Timber Production

The Natural Bridge National Forest contains timber stands of great variety and of every condition of growth from seedling to maturity. White pine, hemlock, poplar and white oak predominate in the lower more fertile soils; chestnut, yellow pine, white and black oaks, locust and many others occupy the dryer hill sides, while the more sterile ridge tops are covered with chestnut oak.

Fortunately the southern end of the Forest land suffered but little from lumbering and fire damage, and here there are thousands of acres of valuable hardwood timber, now forever protected from the hand of careless cutters and from the menace of uncontrolled forest fires. North of the James River, forest fires had caused a much greater damage before the land was placed under protection, and this part of the forest contains less mature timber and more young stands.



As soon as these lands are placed under administration by the Forest Service, the mature and defective timber is offered for sale to timber manufacturers. This is for the purpose of making use of the mature timber and avoiding loss through the defects developing in overmaturity, and to open the stand to such an extent that the younger immature trees may secure a larger measure of sunshine and soil moisture to accelerate growth.

To the present time, the timber cut on the forest has been for forest improvement purposes, that is, larger mature trees and trees infected with disease. No tree is cut until it has reached financial maturity and the younger trees are carefully protected. During the year 1924, \$17,000 worth of timber was cut on the Forest, and this represents but a fraction of what can be cut each year when the entire forest has been under protection and management for a period sufficient to allow complete recovery from past damage. It is estimated that an average acre of the 160,000 acres on the forest will produce perpetually an annual growth of 200 feet board measure, or an average yield for the whole forest of thirty-two million feet of timber, which can be cut each year without diminishing the capital stock of timber. At the assumed average stumpage price of \$5.00 per thousand feet board measure, this would return to the National Treasury \$160,000 each year. Under existing law 35 per cent of the gross receipts from the sale and use of the Forest resources is returned each year for the use of Virginia roads and schools. The revenue yield forecast above cannot be brought about all at once. The large area which for many years was subject to repeated fire damage will require years of careful protection for recovery. That this is now taking place is evident in many parts of the Forest where thrifty young trees are rapidly changing the color of the mountains from the dull grays and browns of barren hillsides to the delicate greens of a healthy young forest.

This is the principal business of the forest. It is a timber factory or producing plant, with a 160,000-acre floor space and a roof as high as heaven. Rich woods soil and sunshine are the raw materials, and the product a commodity without which life on this earth would be difficult, indeed, if not impossible.

Take from Virginia her supply of forest products and the industrial life of the State would be paralyzed. Railroads, telephone and telegraph lines, tanneries, paper mills, would disappear, and the few industries not directly effected by the loss of our timber products would soon have neither means of shipping their products nor means of even dispatching mails or message for orders.

This timber-producing plant differs, however, from many plants. There are no dangerous belts or shafting and no "no admittance" signs pasted over the doors. Visitors are welcome as long as they obey the rules and put no obstacles in the way of timber growing.



## Recreation

Whether your idea of a vacation is a quiet nap under a shady tree, or the thrilling exertion of a bear hunt, the National Forest offers every facility and opportunity for recreation in the open. There are no golf courses nor polo fields nor tennis courts, but aside from those semi-urban sports, it is all there. It is a universal playground, for it is within the reach of rich and poor alike.

## How Do We Get There?

The Natural Bridge National Forest is readily accessible by foot, horse, automobile or railroad. The Norfolk and Western Railway, connecting with the Pennsylvania at Hagerstown, Maryland, with the Baltimore and Ohio at Shenandoah Junction, West Virginia, and with the Southern Railway at Lynchburg and Bristol, Virginia, runs through the western edge of the Forest from Buchanan on the south, through Natural Bridge, Glasgow, Buena Vista, Stuarts Draft and Basic, all located at the principal gateways to the Forest. The main line of the Southern Railway, south of Washington, runs within sight of the Blue Ridge for fifty miles and Amherst, Monroe and Lynchburg all are points from which we may reach the National Forest in two hours time. The Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad from Richmond to Clifton Forge passes through the famous James River Gorge, touching at Big Island, Snowden, Balcony Falls, Natural Bridge, points within a few minutes walk of the Forest. Through Pullman service is supplied on all of these railroads, and the inhabitants of New York City, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, Pittsburg, Cumberland, Richmond, Norfolk, are all within a one night's ride of the Natural Bridge National Forest.

Whether the machine is a flivver or a palace on wheels, there are improved roads to take one from any center of population in the Middle Atlantic States, right into the heart of the National Forest at the rate of 200 miles or better per day, depending upon the inclination to "step on it." The Lee Highway up to the minute in grade, width and surface, affords a view of the Natural Bridge National Forest almost constantly between Staunton, Va., on the north and Buchanan, Va., on the south. Improved branch roads lead from this National Highway at Staunton, Lexington, Natural Bridge, and Buchanan, actually into the Forest. In fact, it is impossible to drive ten miles east from the Lee Highway at any point between Staunton and Buchanan without entering the Forest. Several other modern roads connecting with cities to the east and south are available and roads now under construction will still further put the autoist in touch with the Forest.

## Where Do We Stay When We Arrive?

There are A.A.A. hotels at Staunton, Lexington, Natural Bridge, Lynchburg and Roanoke, with every modern convenience and within an hour's drive of the Forest. Very comfortable smaller hotels are located at all of the smaller towns near the Forest. The Forest Service has prepared comfortable, convenient transient camping grounds for tourists who prefer this type of quarters, and the entire Forest is available for the camper who wishes to choose his own place for a camp in the woods.



## What Are the Attractions Within the Natural Bridge National Forest?

First, there is the stimulation of a life out of doors away from the crowded sections. There are nearly 200 miles of well graded, smoothly treaded trails within the Forest for the hiker and horseman. The Shenandoah and James River afford bass fishing, and the many smaller branches running out from the mountains are the natural home of the mountain trout. These streams are periodically stocked and although subject, to some extent, to the ravages of the poacher and game hog, still furnish good sport for the fisherman. Bear, turkeys, grouse, quail, rabbits, and squirrels are yearly returning to their native haunts under fire protection. Permission to hunt on the National Forest is granted free by the Forest Rangers to persons holding licenses to hunt within the State and county.

The Natural Bridge of Virginia, not within the Forest, but situated at the western edge, is a natural curiosity of the first importance. The "Peaks of Otter," situated in the southern end of the Forest, are far famed for the grandeur of the view to be had from the Top Rock. This point is 3875 feet above sea level and 2500 feet above the surrounding valley. Mons Hotel, situated at the foot of the Peaks, has accommodations for two hundred and fifty guests and is but twelve miles from the Norfolk and Western Railway at Bedford City, over a very good road.

Apple Orchard Mountain, over 4000 feet above sea level, is located ten miles north of the Peaks. Here also are accommodations at reasonable rates for 50 guests at Apple Orchard Camp, a delightfully restful rustic camp where hot nights are unknown.

### Be Careful with Fire

These and many other points of interest give the Natural Bridge National Forest a scenic beauty ranking with any area of a similar size in the east. To maintain this beauty, it is necessary that those visiting the National Forest should observe a few simple rules. Be sure your camp fire is out before you leave it. Every spark. Drench it with water and cover it up with earth. Do not smoke while moving through the woods. Do not smoke at all except in the middle of a wide road or where you have scraped away the leaves from where any ashes might fall. If you see a fire in the woods, put it out if you can and call the Forest Ranger from the nearest telephone. Any toll charges may be reversed. Break your match in two before you throw it down, clean up your lunch papers and boxes, avoid polluting any stream or spring, and treat the camp grounds as you would your own front yard.



## Other Uses

Streamflow protection, timber production, and recreation, the three principal uses of the National Forest, do not preclude the use of the land for other purposes. There are scattered clearings and open sites within the Forest which were acquired with the surrounding woodlands. Many of these have cabins and houses which are rented at nominal prices as homes for fire fighters. Orchards, pastures, woodyards, schools, churches, Boy Scout camps, reservoirs, pipe lines, telephone and telegraph lines occupy the National Forest land under special use permits which are so regulated as to not interfere in any way with watershed protection and timber growth. Cattle and horses from the adjoining farms are grazed under permit at reasonable rates, care being exercised to prevent overgrazing to the detriment of the young timber or wild life. In brief, the attempt is to adapt each acre of the National Forest to its highest use, compatible with the primary purpose of timber production.

There are locations on the Forest admirably situated with regard to accessibility, seclusion and water supply for summer home sites, where the seeker for the restful silence of the woods may secure permission to erect a home on long-term permit and enjoy all the benefits of a woodland home and still be so situated as to return to town within a few hours if necessary. Application for any use of the Forest can be made to the Forest Rangers located at Buena Vista or Natural Bridge or to the Forest Supervisor in Lynchburg.

## Organization

The Natural Bridge is one of thirteen National Forests comprising the Eastern National Forest District, commonly known as District 7 and under the general jurisdiction of the District Forester at Washington, D.C. The Forest Supervisor, who has direct charge of all activities within the National Forest, has headquarters at Lynchburg, Virginia, situated 20 miles east of the Forest on the Southern, Norfolk and Western, and Chesapeake and Ohio Railways. Under the Supervisor are two district rangers located at Buena Vista and Natural Bridge. The ranger districts contain from 60,000 to 90,000 acres each.

The Ranger has immediate supervision of the protection and administration of his district, and is the agent of the Forest Service in direct contact with the people of his district. It is his responsibility to enforce the various regulations in regard to timber sales, use or grazing of the Forest and protect it from damage by fire or vandalism.

Fire protection has been and will continue to be an activity of greatest importance in the National Forests. The value of the National Forest to the Nation depends upon the degree to which it is protected from fire.



For this purpose, lookout men are employed to detect a fire at the start. Lookout towers are located on Apple Orchard Mountain, Bluff Mountain, and Bald Mountain, and living quarters are furnished at the base of the tower. The lookout man remains at his post day and night during the fire season which extends from early March to May in the spring and from the latter part of October to the middle of December in the fall.

A telephone is placed on the top of the towers, which is connected directly with the Forest Ranger's headquarters and also with many of the crew chiefs or wardens.

The labor for fire suppression forces is made up of the local residents in and near the Forest. These men are grouped into crews in charge of a warden, each warden being responsible for the first attack on any forest fire occurring in his district. The forest is divided into forty five-warden districts with a fully equipped crew in each.

When the lookout sees the smoke of a forest fire first rising from any point within his range of vision, he immediately calls the warden nearest to the fire, advises him of the location and sends him with his crew to the fire. Minutes count in the attack on a fire. Food is easily carried in sacks, fire tools, lanterns and everything necessary are kept always ready for use. With but few exceptions, it is possible to have a crew at work on a forest fire within one hour from the time it is first detected. Telephone lines run into every part of the Forest and roads and trails furnish means for transportation of fire fighters and supplies.

Roads are being constructed and improved as rapidly as funds are available. The Forest is equipped with modern road building equipment and has a modern garage and repair shop.

Maps showing the location of trails, roads, improvements, camp grounds, fishing waters and headquarters of Forest Officers are available for distribution and may be had upon request from the Forest Supervisor or Forest Ranger.

In brief, here is a magnificent area of wild unbroken mountain forest land which belongs to the people of the United States. It is furnishing crystal pure freestone water to Lynchburg, Buena Vista, Bedford and Buchanan. It is checking the run-off of precipitation, lessening the danger of flood and keeping the streams flowing during the dry periods. It is supplying timber and forest products for local use and sustaining the lives of wood-using industries. It is protecting the growing of young trees so that the supply of timber is not for today merely, or tomorrow, but for all time, insuring a perpetual supply of forest products to this part of the State. Here the period of reckless lumbering and wasteful destruction by carelessness has gone forever, and in its stead is a period of careful,



systematic management and administration that will make the Forest a pride to every one of its stockholders, made up of every taxpayer in the United States. And in spite of the benefits thus provided, it is costing the taxpayer nothing, for the receipts from the sale of mature timber alone is in excess of the entire cost of administration and protection.

It is available as a playground for thousands otherwise forbidden the pleasure of mountain air, mountain water, mountain scenery, a place to relax and rest and regain the vital nerve force so necessary in our modern age of intense competition. A site for a summer home for the city man, a source of pasture and fuel supply for the local farmer, and a home for the wild life, the birds, the squirrels, the rabbits, Brer Bear, Brer Fox and elk too if you please.

This is your property. You should know more about it, and the best way to secure information is to come to see it. You can then better appreciate its beauty, its purpose, its value to the State and the Nation. Your sense of ownership and pride of possession will prompt you to assist in the great work it is doing. There is no better way to help than to be sure that you or your companions do no act which might endanger the life of the Forest.

When you are planning a trip or a camp in the mountains, see the Forest Ranger first. He will furnish you with maps and directions, give assistance in helping you to enjoy the mountains. You may call on him in time of sickness or trouble and he will secure aid for you. These provisions are for your own comfort and pleasure in order that you may thoroughly enjoy and be benefited by your trip to the Forest, that you may use and not abuse the National Forest that is paying its own way.



